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ABSTRACT

An academic teacher at a maximum-security prison in Virginia conducted a study to determine how to improve instruction and motivate adult learners in a correctional facility. Data were collected through a survey that was distributed to 22 individuals and completed by 20 of them (2 academic teachers, 1 vocational instructor, 6 students, and 11 inmates who were presently or had previously worked as teacher aides/tutors). The survey was supplemented with interviews of the vocational instructor, two students, and three former tutors and by 3 weeks of classroom observations. Although the survey responses varied widely, most respondents stated clearly that teachers must care about students as individuals and show that they care about students and are interested in their welfare. Respondents also indicated with regularity that teachers should recognize and reward students for doing good work. Many respondents believed that teachers should be well-organized and know their subject area. Suggestions for improving instruction and student motivation included providing adequate numbers of computers in each classroom and ensuring that computer programs meet students' needs and instructional levels. Finally, respondents generally agreed that students themselves must posses a certain degree of self-motivation and be able to accept responsibility for their personal growth. (MN)

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Practitioner Research Briefs, 1999-2000 Report Series

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Virginia Adult Education Research Network

Practitioner Research Briefs, 1999-2000 Report Series

Correctional Education: Instruction and Student Motivation

Dennis Traverse, Virginia Department of Correctional Education

Background

How would you like to teach in a classroom that is literally located in a building at the very top of a mountain? That is where I teach. I am an academic teacher at Keen Mountain Correctional Center (KMCC), currently classified as a Level IV maximum-security prison. KMCC is located in Southwest Virginia, nearly 2,500 feet above the community of Oakwood, Virginia. I am employed by the Department of Correctional Education (DCE), considered by many (including myself) as the best correctional education agency and system in the country. The DCE currently employs approximately 1000 full time employees. Approximately 750 of those employees are academic and vocational teachers who are working in numerous correctional facilities, juvenile detention centers, and community facilities throughout the state. Many teachers, like me, are new to the system with less than two years experience in such a unique environment.

Albeit I am relatively new to this position in this agency, I am not a newcomer to the fields of corrections and education. I have 18 years of experience with the Virginia Department of Corrections and almost six years with the Georgia Department of Corrections. Over 10 of those years in Virginia have been either directly or indirectly associated with training institutional staff. I have also been a part-time instructor with the community college system for more than 15 years. Because of this unique combination of circumstances and experiences, I was prompted to participate in this practitioner research project and seek answers for a concern that I had about my present teaching job. I wondered how I might be able improve instruction and motivate adults learners in an adult correctional facility.

Inquiry

What can I do to improve instruction and motivate adult learners in a correctional facility?

Action

To answer this question, I designed a survey instrument and presented copies to my colleagues, students in the Literacy Incentive Program and the Adult Basic Education Program, and to inmates that perform or had performed duties as teacher aides/tutors. A total of twenty-two surveys were distributed. To supplement the survey, I interviewed several students and observed my classroom activities over a period of three weeks. I documented what I believed were positive behavioral patterns that appeared to be linked to either my method of instruction (teaching style) or to a motivational factor.

Data Collection

From the 22 surveys I distributed, I received responses from 3 colleagues (two academic teachers and one vocational instructor), 6 students, and 11 teacher aides/tutors. Four of the latter responses were written in narrative format rather than individual answers to each survey question. The survey consisted of 21 questions and provided a section for comments. Some of the questions asked were: What could/should I do to improve my teaching? What do students like/dislike about my teaching style? What do students identify as good/bad teacher behaviors? What can I do to increase my students' motivation to learn? What motivated you as a student? And to teachers I asked, What did you do that you believe may have motivated your student? In addition to the survey, I conducted six interviews (one with a vocational teacher, two with students, and three with former tutors) and noted their responses. The questions asked during the interviews were the same as or similar in nature to those in the survey. Over a period of three weeks,

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I observed the students involved with classroom learning activities and recorded three events that I interpreted to be motivational factors.

Findings

The responses to each question in the survey varied greatly. However, several responses appeared more times than any other. Most significant and frequently repeated throughout the survey and during the interview process, respondents clearly stated that teachers must care about the student as an individual and must also care about his education. The teacher must show that he/she cares about the student and that he/she is interested in his educational welfare. As one respondent put it, "...a teacher who genuinely and sincerely cares if a student learns or not." Another important comment often appearing on the survey or stated was that teachers should be there to help students, not just to receive a paycheck. Students, through conversation with the teacher and/or by observation of the teacher, will make a determination about whether or not the teacher is putting forth an effort to actively help them. If students do not feel the teacher is engaged in their best interests, they classify the teacher as someone who comes to class simply to earn a paycheck. In the words of another survey participant, "...if they detect that a teacher is not sincere in wanting his students to better themselves or if the teacher is only there to take home a paycheck or is just there to have a position."

Respondents, with regularity, indicated that teachers should recognize/reward a student when he does good work. When a student finally grasps a difficult concept, achieves a high score on a study assignment, or otherwise performs consistently well on a particular subject, he wants to receive praise for his efforts. Additionally, consistent with the recognition/reward system, remarks suggested that students can be motivated by being provided with incentives to learn. Most responses in this arena advocated receiving supplementary good-time. It was noted that this good-time award incentive should be in addition to the earned sentence credit or good-time inmates already receive while in the correctional system.

Furthermore, many survey participants felt that teachers should be well organized and should know their subject area. Respondents felt that if not well organized, a teacher will not be as effective or efficient in the classroom as he/she should be. Students who get the impression or believe that the teacher does not know the subject area he/she is teaching lose confidence in the teacher and subsequently question their own potential to learn. To make this point clear, one respondent wrote, "I liked any teacher who believed in me, who really knew his subject area. As an example of good teacher behavior, I knew a history teacher who really liked history and could make it come alive."

To improve instruction and student motivation, participants stated that an adequate number of computers should be available for student use in each classroom and that the educational computer software programs installed should meet student needs at each instructional level. Pre-GED and GED software programs for higher-level students are necessary; however, there is also a need for software programs for those students who are working toward the higher levels. Students that are motivated and want to learn also want the technology that is available and appropriate for their present level of achievement.

The last of the common responses indicated that the students themselves must possess a certain degree of self-motivation in order for them to want to learn. Motivation cannot be instilled by teachers alone. Students must want to learn and they must be able to accept the responsibility for their personal growth. A respondent addressing this issue commented, "...the student must have the motivation within himself to want to learn. Like the old saying, you can lead a horse to water but you can't make him drink."

Implications and Future Directions

The information obtained from this project should certainly be helpful to the correctional educators entering the classroom for the first time as well as the seasoned and experienced teachers already in the classrooms. From the responses, it appears that improving instruction and student motivation is closely linked. Michael Jordan pointed out in a recent interview on Meet The Press when he was asked if he could motivate his Washington Capitol players that he could not motivate the players. However, he said he has to give them the ways and the reasons to motivate themselves. Perhaps we, as correctional educators, should look for the ways and the reasons to improve our instruction and student motivation consistent with what the responses suggest. ❑

Practitioner Research Briefs, 1999-2000 Report Series

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